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Challenging Creative Authority: Consuelo Jimenez Underwood's Battle With Cultural Identity

FINA-A343: Race Problems in American Art

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Consuelo Jimenez Underwood is a Californian-born first-generation American. As an artist, Underwood uses her personal border experiences to convey external validation of ancestral memory and personal quest. By using these experiences, she is able to give the viewer a peek inside of her national and societal identity a daughter of Mexican immigrants. Her work has an obvious focus on the detrimental effects of United States border policies. Underwood's *Flags* series uses the icons of the American flag made in a way that is still recognizable, while having an undeniable separation from the traditional "American" style. This paper argues that the icons of the American flag and borders used in Consuelo Jimenez Underwood's art displays her personal and cultural identity as a first generation American.

Mary Austin wrote, "There are two types of community culture. One in which the community works by individuals to produce definite achievements on a cultural plane, and the other in which the community exists chiefly to hear about what has been produced" (Meyer 53). With the incorporation of different cultures, the art world has become more diverse. American art is not simply defined by its American artists. The term "American" does not mean white, or that their family came over on the Mayflower. "American" can mean someone who has just gained citizenship or a first generation American. Since a modern day American artist has different cultures blended into their personal experiences, there is a broader spectrum of societal styles incorporated in American art. Underwood uses her series of borders and flags to convey her cultural experiences.

Beginning in 2010 with a piece entitled, *Undocumented Border Flowers*, Underwood starts her borders series. The work contains a somber blue tone to it, creating a calming effect to the viewer. This work includes flowers that are indigenous to the United States and Mexico. The

four types of plants shown are The California poppy, Arizona saguaro, New Mexico yucca, and the Texas bluebonnet. These four flowers are the states' official flowers. This suggests a parallel to a state flag or border because it is recognizable as a symbol of the state. Once a flower becomes an official state flower, it has a sense of belonging to that state. She is exploring the idea of documentation in immigration in this piece by using these flowers. The idea that people are living beings that must belong to one nation is common in American society. She is saying that since plants are living beings too, should they be documented and belong to the nations that they live in? She includes more fibers in this piece in a vein like pattern. These fiber veins are showing that the lands are linked and cannot be separated by political or unnatural borders. The living beings that are in our lands do not conform to the borders that humans have given them. On this piece she gives the quote:

The idea is to engage the viewer in a discussion about borderline issues with high-powered visuals, and non-confrontational icons. The installations highlight the dire needs of the environment when it comes to the issue of the border wall. There is an alarm system going off in the borderlands and everywhere else in the world. Borders are changing the earth's physical environment in a negative direction.

Continuing the border series in her 2014 work, *LA Borderline* Underwood explores the meaning behind the political borders between the United States and Mexico. By using the blatantly recognizable imagery of the map of the United States, she makes the viewer immediately aware of what they are looking at. By placing flowers indigenous to her family's previous home in Mexico over the map of the United States she is connecting a parallel to her personal identity. She uses craft materials such as strings and papier-mache to give this wall

installation a more three dimensional effect. The entire installation has a cohesive color scheme that holds the piece together. The similar palate across the space holds the piece together and shows that even though there is separation by the border, there is a sense of togetherness. On her website she writes, “The LA culture has become one with the borderline. Flags from all over the world are riding the freeways...they appear to be getting along” (Consuelojunderwood.com).

Borders have always been used to show separation in art. A border can symbolize the end of a work or a separation within a land. The idea of the political border is strong in Underwood’s work. For her, borders symbolize the separation of her two heritages. As a first generation American with a family from Mexico, she has been split into two cultures her whole life.

Coming from a Traditional Mexican family, she uses the borders in her art to not only show a physical separation, but also a personal separation. The cultural divide that comes with being a first generation American can feel like one is being pulled in two directions. Underwood uses borders in her work to show both her personal view on the social and physical divide. By using a recognizable subject matter and the incorporation of textiles from other cultures, she shows her national identity. (consuelojunderwood.com)

Her borders series includes the political borders between the United States and Mexico. Using this recognizable imagery, she is able to relay her subject matter to any viewer. She incorporates textiles and styles from her Mexican heritage and blends them with the recognizable imagery of the American/Mexican border. When speaking about her work she states, “The borderline is a horrific scar that slashes across the world . . . a stark depiction of the future. When border-phobia prevails, and all the flowers are hovering across the land as

Spirit.” Her fascination for borders and separation carries over into her work with the American flag.

To Underwood, a flag is a separation between two cultures. She shows her inner battle with culture in her Flags series. Through her work titled, *Home of the Brave*, she shows her personal struggle between being a first-generation American in a family of immigrants. Growing up in a traditional Mexican family, Underwood was taught different ways of creating textiles in their cultural styles. Later in life, she began her Flags series to show her national divide. Using these traditional textile applications, she created an American flag out of her Mexican heritage’s style. Underwood includes small beadwork, pins, and attached cloth to convey all the little interworkings of the society that cannot be seen from far away. She adds sewn flowers similar to the ones included in her borders series to convey the living lives that are included in a culture.

A flag is a cipher full of geometric shapes and colors. Flags are representational figures that convey a message with simplicity and recognition. A flag can bear the mark of legitimacy of national, civic, or personal pride. A flag is a metaphor for nationalism (Silverberg). There is an idea that one’s identity can be signified by a piece of cloth attached to a mast. Underwood explores this in her work with flags. Finding that equilibrium of where you came from and where you are now is very evident in her work.

In the 2013 work, *One Nation Underground*, She combines two images from flags. She takes the imagery from the Mexican flag and adds the colors and geometric shapes from the American flag. She includes a border down the middle that shows the separation between the two nations. About this work she states, “Living in the borderlands, flags become similar, blurred, often both nations seem the same” (Consuelojunderwood.com).

Through her work, Consuelo Jimenez Underwood is able to convey her diverse heritage and show her struggle through identity. Underwood seeks to make the viewer aware of the borders and icons around them in everyday life. She informs us that once borders are crossed, notions of nations are re-evaluated and reset. By using the icons of the American flag made from textiles of other cultures to show her personal and cultural identity as a first generation American.

Works Cited

Borders and Flags. www.consuelojunderwood.com

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Silverberg, Michael. "The Flag." *Print* 66.1 (2012): 88. *Academic Search Premier*. Web. 4 Apr.

United States Map. <http://www.united-states-map.com/usa7244z.htm>

Photos:



Map of the United States



LA Borderline 2013. Wall Installation.



Undocumented Border Flowers 2010. Wall Installation, Fiber



The California poppy



Arizona Saguaro



New Mexico yucca



Texas bluebonnet



Home of the Brave



One Nation Underground